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TAGS: [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [BL](#) [VN](#)
SUBJECT: VENEZUELAN PLANE CONTROVERSY GOES INTERNATIONAL

REF: A. LA PAZ 3153
[1](#)B. LA PAZ 3013

Classified By: ECOPOL Chief Mike Hammer for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Although facts are emerging, rumors continue to run rampant concerning the aborted landing of a Venezuelan C-130 Hercules airplane. Forced to leave one Bolivian town by a rock-wielding mob, the plane was unable to land at another Bolivian town as protesters blocked the runway. A Venezuelan Development Bank Official was left behind to face an angry opposition crowd, who claimed he was shuttling \$800,000 for nefarious purposes. The plane finally emergency landed in Rio Branco, Brazil to refuel. Although the Brazilians officially state there were no weapons aboard, some in the opposition continue to believe there were weapons aboard or that the crew ditched cargo en route to the Brazilian airport. Opposition leaders claim privately that the Brazilians never opened the cargo, an allegation confirmed by Brazilian Military Attach Officers to Embassy DATT. Brazilian DATT Officers also said Venezuela has requested regular use of Rio Branco. Irrespective of the incident, opposition leaders argue Venezuelan planes are landing in Bolivia in flagrant disregard of Bolivian sovereignty and without the Constitutionally-required permission of the opposition-controlled Senate. Meanwhile, the Bolivian and Venezuelan governments have blamed the U.S. End Summary.

Just the Facts

[1](#)2. (U) A Venezuelan C-130 Hercules cargo plane departed El Alto airport near La Paz the morning of December 6. It landed in Riberalta, Beni Department (state), near the Brazilian border, at about 1100. The plane was on the ground only a short time before an angry crowd of at least 200 pelted the plane and crew with rocks. The crew made a hasty departure at about 1130 and left a passenger behind from the Venezuelan Development Bank (BANDES). The crew tried to land the plane at Beni's capital of Trinidad, but were denied a safe landing approach by opposition forces blocking the runway. Opposition forces also blocked runways in Guayaramerin (Beni) and Cobija (Pando). The plane asked for

and was granted permission for an emergency landing in Rio Branco, Brazil, at about 1500. Although the plane was granted permission to leave Rio Branco at 1700, it stayed until the morning of December 7 waiting for funds to pay for fuel. These events have been covered widely by the press and confirmed by the government. Details concerning the number of Venezuelans on board, contents of the plane's cargo, and the mission of the BANDES official remain contested.

Brazil: No Arms, No Ammo, No Problem

13. (U) The Brazilian National Police released a statement December 7 that there were 35 passengers and crew, including 33 Venezuelan military, but claimed it found no weapons in the plane. The Brazilians added they did not know the plane's mission. The Brazilian Aeronautics Communication Center told the media it considered the case "closed." Brazilian President Inacio Lula da Silva's press secretary was quoted in the Bolivian press saying that if "it is necessary" the Brazilian Government would "ask for an explanation," although it considers the incident a matter for Bolivian and Venezuelan authorities.

14. (C) The Brazilian Embassy told EmbOffs December 7 that Brazil simply granted the plane emergency landing to refuel, per a request from the Venezuelan Embassy in La Paz. They claimed no Venezuelans were on board beyond the crew and that 22 helicopter crew replacements had been off-loaded in La Paz prior to the incident.

Lingering Opposition Suspicions

15. (C) Opposition Senators Roger Pinto and Paulo Bravo canceled a meeting with us December 7 in order to catch an early-morning flight to Rio Branco with journalists. They relayed through intermediary Javier Flores that some opposition leadership in Beni and Pando states originally thought the plane was incoming from Venezuela and therefore had the fuel needed to "escape" back to Venezuela after its hostile reception in Riberalta. This prompted a flurry of phone calls from opposition leaders to convince Brazilian leadership to ground the plane and investigate its contents, including a call from Flores to the Brazilian Assistant Executive Defense Secretary and a call from Pinto to "the number two" at the Brazilian Presidential Palace (he would not specify who this was). (Note: Lula advisor Marco Aurelio Garcia was in La Paz when this incident occurred in advance of Lula's planned visit December 16-17. End Note.) Flores said the plane's crew requested an emergency landing and landed without incident, but that two Brazilian fighter planes were en route to enforce the request in case they resisted. According to a read-out from Senator Bravo at Rio Branco December 8, Flores said the Brazilians were not allowed to inspect the contents of the cargo under international law because it requested an emergency landing and was not forced to land. Although the opposition has not pushed the issue publicly, Flores said the Brazilian "inspection" consisted of asking the Venezuelans what was on board. He added a Bolivian plane came to pay for the Venezuelan plane's fuel with \$30,000.

16. (C) Brazilian Military Attach officers confirmed to Embassy DATT December 10 that the Venezuelans invoked the right to refuse inspection. Although they did not look inside the boxes, the Brazilian DATT officers found the crates "suspicious." According the Brazilian DATT officers, the Venezuelans confirmed the cargo was destined for Riberalta and Trinidad, per their original flight plan. Brazilian DATT Officers also said Venezuela has requested regular use of Rio Branco as a refueling stopover in the future out of concerns it cannot depend on use of airstrips in the Media Luna (eastern, opposition-dominated states).

Did the Crew Drop Cargo?

¶7. (C) Flores also claimed that the crew dumped "most" of its cargo en route, a story repeated by other opposition sources.

He has since backed away from the statement, saying only that "it is possible" and that opposition sympathizers were combing the jungle along the probable flight path for evidence. He said this could take many days and could be inconclusive. An officer with the Brazilian Defense Attach's Office told us the plane arrived with "little cargo." He confirmed Brazilian authorities were investigating the plane and said if cargo was dropped, it is likely on the Brazilian side.

Bolivian/Venezuelan Govts Can't Get Story Straight

¶8. (U) Many of details of the incident continue to be debated and contradicted. Although the Brazilians eventually counted 35 Venezuelans, Brazilian media reported 40 military officers were on board. Although a Bolivian Air Force official claimed the craft was carrying 12 Venezuelan pilots and technical crew in addition to the C-130 crew, both the Bolivian and Venezuelan governments claimed December 7 that there were 22 Venezuelan helicopter pilots and technicians.

¶9. (U) Brazilian media also cited unnamed Brazilian Police sources as verifying the plane was carrying arms destined for the Bolivian military. Commander of the Army Freddy Bersatti said he only found out about the flight December 6, but that the plane was only returning to Venezuela and not carrying anything to the best of his knowledge. The government had initially claimed the plane was carrying humanitarian assistance/medicine. Presidency Minister (Chief of Staff) Juan Quintana later said it was carrying helicopter replacement parts and "some objects." On December 7, the Venezuelan Embassy claimed the cargo was "electrical cables" and over the weekend government and Venezuelan Embassy sources claimed the plane was carrying "communications gear." Although Minister of Public Works Jose Kinn admitted that the flight was "not regular," the Bolivian Air Force later claimed the flight request has made November 30 and approved December 3.

BANDES Bagman Carrying Agreement, Not Cash

¶10. (U) The opposition originally claimed Luis Klein Ferrer, the Venezuelan Development Bank (BANDES) official left behind in Riberalta, was carrying a briefcase with \$827,000 in cash, ostensible to distribute for nefarious purposes. Although opposition Senator Walter Guiteras (PODEMOS) repeated this claim, Beni Regional Police Commander Col. Miguel Angel Villarroel reported Klein was instead carrying an \$870,000 agreement to fund a nut cultivation project. The government originally claimed Klein was depositing a check for \$827,000 in a local bank for the nut project, per normal BANDES business. Villarroel reported Klein was driving away from the airport to meet with a local civic group to sign the agreement when a group of opposition supporters stopped the vehicle and began to interrogate and beat Klein. Villarroel alleges he rescued Klein, brought him to the police station, and sent him out the back door to be escorted to safety by Bolivian military. Bolivian Vice-Minister of Citizen Security Marcos Farfan accused the opposition of torturing and attempting to lynch Klein and praised the police for "saving the life of this Venezuelan official."

¶11. (C) The Bolivian press has been scrutinizing the background of the BANDES official Luis Klein Ferrer based on his ties to Venezuelan military intelligence and role investigating possible conspiracy in the ranks. Captain Klein was the Venezuelan Assistant Defense Attach in La Paz in 2006. While ADATT, Klein was apparently so hostile to the U.S. that we complained to the Venezuelans. Klein was eventually transferred to the Venezuelan Development Bank in La Paz.

Spin Begins: Why Not Blame the U.S.?

¶12. (U) Bolivian, Venezuelan, and Cuban government officials are painting the incident as a savage attack on foreign citizens by an unreasonable opposition, and hinted that the U.S. is behind it all. Evo Morales apologized to the Venezuelan government for the incident in a December 6 TV interview and implied that the aircraft attackers were working with others "from outside" (implying other opposition departments or even another country, i.e. the U.S.). Morales promised to find and punish those responsible. Vice-Minister of citizen Security Marcos Farfan said December 7 that the government had already identified the perpetrators and were preparing legal action against them.

¶13. (U) Farfan said the citizens of Riberalta were always hospitable before, leading him to believe "these violent attitudes are generated by groups from outside the area." Bolivian Minister of the Presidency Juan Quintana blamed the opposition for "generating a climate of tension." Government Minister Alfredo Rada accused opposition leaders and PODOMOS party head Jorge Tuto Quiroga of planning the confrontation to "create the image that the country is being invaded" and "encouraging an atmosphere of xenophobic hysteria against Venezuelan military officials." Bolivian Vice-Minister of Citizen Security Marcos Farfan scolded protesters for endangering the Venezuelans and almost causing a "grave accident." Cuban Ambassador Rafael Dauza chimed in, saying "the only thing they wanted was to refuel."

¶14. (U) Bolivian press reported that Saul Ortega, Chairman of the International Affairs Committee for the Venezuelan National Assembly, said that 22 Venezuelans were attacked with projectiles on Bolivian soil when they were trying to board an plane belonging to the Venezuelan Armed Forces while providing help during a natural disaster. Ortega accused Santa Cruz Prefect (governor) Ruben Costas for the attack, and characterized him as a lackey of the United States. "These are violent actions that have been perpetrated by the opponents of Evo Morales and, for this reason, are terrorist actions." He asserted "these acts against Venezuelans" are financed by the U.S. and that "the opposition had received instruction from the U.S. Embassy and CIA" to carry them out. Ortega stressed the "terrorist" attack put the crew and aircraft in mortal jeopardy and would ask the Bolivian government to guarantee the security of Venezuelan citizens.

No Apologies from Obstinate Opposition

¶15. (C) Opposition PODEMOS party leader Jorge Quiroga replied to government criticism December 9 by criticizing Brazilian President Inacio Lula da Silva's "disinterest and silence as planes with elite Venezuelan military enter (Bolivia), violating our national sovereignty and taking refuge" in Rio Branco. Quiroga added he hoped the power of Chavez was not "of the magnitude that obliges Brazil to be a silent accomplice to what is occurring" in Bolivia. Quiroga hopes Lula will raise with Evo concerns about Bolivia's democracy and Venezuelan intervention when he visits La Paz December 16-17.

¶16. (U) The Riberalta Civic Committee President is taking a hard line on the issue, telling press that they will not permit any more Venezuelan planes to land. This position tracks with the November 29 announcement from Beni Prefect (governor) Ernesto Suarez that Venezuelan planes would not be allowed to land in Trinidad. (Note: There is a history of opposition accusations the Venezuelans are shipping in arms, perhaps destined for unofficial pro-government paramilitaries. The opposition also complained about an early morning Beni stopover by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez as an affront to Bolivian sovereignty reported in Ref ¶B. End Note.) The Riberalta Civic Committee is also calling for the resignation of the Police Chief Villarroel for helping Klein escape before he could fully explain the motives for his trip.

Senate: Troop Movements Violate Constitution

¶17. (U) The opposition-controlled Bolivian Senate has asked Minister of Defense Walker San Miguel to explain why foreign troops (i.e. Venezuelan) are entering Bolivia without Senate approval, as required by the Constitution. Responding to President Morales' December 6 apology for not consulting the Senate on foreign troop movements, opposition Senator Luis Vasques Villamor (PODEMOS) said, "The subject of apologizing to one or another is not relevant. The President, despite his apology, is responsible for violating the Constitution."

Comment:

¶18. (C) The opposition in the Media Luna is likely to follow the lead of Trinidad and Riberalta and adopt measures to prevent Venezuelan aircraft from landing at their airports. This would deny Morales a source of support and make a popular stand on the issue of Venezuelan "imperialism." Such a move, however, would ratchet up the prospects for violent confrontations with the government. This latest incident reflects the opposition's determination to try to put a stop to Venezuelan "interference" and illustrates the Bolivia Government's inability to exercise control over opposition dominated departments.

¶19. (C) Comment Continued: Whether by design or incompetency, the government appears to be responding no better or consistently to this incident than the earlier Chavez stopover or Trinidad mystery crates incidents. However, unlike prior middle of the night stopovers followed by days of "he said, she said" tit for tat between government and opposition leaders, a third party, Brazil, has negated opposition accusation of weapons transfers. Unless the opposition can back up claims to the contrary, it may well end up looking unreasonable. If there were in fact no arms, Evo may have lost an opportunity to invite the press to look in the plane and take the wind out of opposition criticisms. In any event, the government is on the defensive and remains vulnerable to the perception that Chavez is the one calling the shots. Evo will have to be careful about how his government handles future Venezuelan flights or risk losing domestic, and possibly international, support. End Comment.
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